



## Neighborhood Health Plan is best in U.S.

01:00 AM EST on Wednesday, November 1, 2006

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PROVIDENCE – RItE Care has swept the winnings in a new nationwide ranking of health-care quality, in what many called further testament to the success of the state-run health plan for low-income families.

All three of the insurance companies that enroll RItE Care members ranked in the top five in the country, with Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island named America's number-one Medicaid HMO.

A joint project of the National Committee on Quality Assurance and U.S. News & World Report, this ranking looked at private insurers that have contracts with state governments to provide health care to certain Medicaid enrollees. The ranking weighed such matters as members' ability to get the care they need, the plans' record on immunizations and cancer screening, and member satisfaction.

"Neighborhood Health Plan is now the best in the nation at what we do," declared Raymond Lavoie, chairman of Neighborhood's board of directors, to prolonged applause from the politicians, health-care leaders and employees who gathered in the plan's lobby for a brief celebration yesterday.

The top-performing Medicaid plans tend to score high on access, prevention and providing adequate mental and behavioral health care, said John Friedman, spokesman for NCQA, a nonprofit agency that monitors and accredits managed-care plans. "What you are seeing is plans that are taking good care of people, keeping them healthy and scoring high on member satisfaction," he said.

In the NCQA rankings of 71 Medicaid HMOs, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island pulled a close second, and UnitedHealthcare of New England ranked fourth. But Blue Cross and United were nowhere near the top in separate rankings of commercial and Medicare products (Neighborhood is a Medicaid-only plan), suggesting that the key to success has been the state's role in negotiating and enforcing its RItE Care contracts.

Speakers at yesterday's event acknowledged as much. "This is a tribute to RItE Care more than anything else," said Mark E. Reynolds, Neighborhood's chief executive officer.

"It's performance with accountability," said Governor Carcieri. "This approach represents collaboration with accountability," said U.S. Sen. Jack Reed. "It's a testament to RItE Care.... Our challenge is to make sure you have the resources to do that job."

As Reed's comment suggested, the honor comes at a time when the Medicaid program – of which RItE Care is part – is under increasing pressure to cut costs. The program is financed jointly by the state and federal governments. Many states find Medicaid is eating up a growing portion of the budget, even as the federal government is also looking for ways to cut back.

Speakers yesterday took jabs at Carcieri for his proposal earlier this year to drop from RItE Care 6,800 parents and 3,000 immigrant children, many of whom are here illegally. The General Assembly kept the parents and immigrants on the RItE Care rolls, but agreed not to enroll any more illegal immigrants after Dec. 31. "Efforts to chop children and parents from RItE Care were both shortsighted and counterproductive," said Senate President Joseph A. Montalbano, D-North Providence, pledging to "resist attacks against RItE Care."

In an interview afterward, Carcieri called such comments "tasteless, frankly." Asked whether he was committed to paying for RItE Care, Carcieri said, "Federal funding is declining. The rules are changing." "The problem is the illegals," Carcieri added. "That's the nub of the issue. ... We can't support people coming here from all over the world."

Carcieri said a team he appointed to study Medicaid includes "the best brainpower in the country." "I'm confident we'll come up with some ideas," he said.

Neighborhood Health Plan was founded in 1993 by the 13 community health centers that serve the poor and uninsured around the state, in response to the state's plans to start RItE Care the next year. Neighborhood now enrolls 75,500 people, including 68,800 RItE Care members, plus several thousand children with special needs and children who are in foster care. Blue Cross enrolls 13,900 RItE Care members and United 34,300. Under RItE Care, the state pays health plans a flat fee per enrollee, and requires them to offer a defined set of services.

This is the second year NCQA has published detailed rankings of health plans in U.S. News & World Report. RItE Care health plans have always performed well on NCQA standards, but this is the first year that one has reached the top spot. NCQA was founded in 1990 to measure the quality of managed-care plans. It gathers an enormous amount of data from each participating health plan, and offers accreditation to those that meet its standards. Some 30 states, including Rhode Island, require managed-care plans to obtain NCQA accreditation.

RItE Care had 117,000 enrollees at the end of August, mostly poor children and their parents. The program has long been regarded as a national model for managing the care of this population. Data show improvements in child and maternal health, while costs in RItE Care have increased more slowly than commercial insurance. RItE Care enrollees make up two-thirds of Medicaid beneficiaries, but consume only one-fifth of Medicaid dollars. The rest goes to the elderly and disabled.

HMO rankings can be found at [www.ncqa.org](http://www.ncqa.org).